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# Syria said to have offered chemical weapons to Iran

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Syria agreed to supply chemical weapons to Iran earlier this year, but has apparently backed away from the agreement — at least temporarily — according to intelligence sources.

Had the deal gone through, it would have represented a major escalation of weaponry in the Middle East. The Israeli government is known to have been seriously concerned about the transaction.

One U.S. analyst said transfer of chemical arms to Iran would probably set off a chain reaction as other nations in the region scramble to arm themselves with the "poor man's atomic bomb."

However, he said, it was possible that Syria could go through with the transaction at practically any time, and for that reason U.S. officials remain concerned about the matter.

"You could write tomorrow that Syria has not given chemical weapons to Iran and be wrong," he said of the situation's uncertainty. "Or you could write that it has and also be wrong."

It is not clear why the Syrians decided not to go through with the agreement, which was apparently firm as late as last summer. But speculation centers on the possibility that the United States applied diplomatic pressure on Syrian leader Hafez Assad, with whom extensive contacts were made during attempts to resolve the hijacking of a Trans World Airlines plane last June.

The situation is complicated by internal divisions within the Iranian leadership and by the reluctance of the Soviet Union to see chemical weapons spread on its Middle Eastern borders.

One intelligence source said Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and other Iranian religious leaders generally oppose the use of chemical weapons. But the Iranian military strongly favors developing a chemical weapons capability, and may have already done so to a limited extent.

One analyst said the Soviets — in contrast to their generally enthusiastic attitude toward production and use of chemical weapons — fear that the spread of chemical weapons in the region could boomerang against them. For example, he said, if Iran acquires a chemical weapons production capability, the weapons could be transferred to the Mujahideen resistance fighters in Afghanistan for use against the Soviets themselves.

Administration officials generally are reluctant to discuss Syrian chemical warfare capability in detail.

"The Syrians have been interested in chemicals for years," Douglas J. Feith, deputy assistant secretary of defense for negotiations policy, said in a recent interview. "They

do have a production capability for nerve agent."

Mr. Feith declined to elaborate, but an intelligence source said the Syrians have the most advanced chemical weapons capability in the Middle East.

The capability is seen by U.S. officials as a dangerous wild card in the Middle East that, if played, could radically upset the balance of power in unpredictable ways.

It has been known for some time, for example, that the Iranian military has been interested in acquiring chemical weapons. Iranian troops have suffered Iraqi chemical weapons attacks over the last two years in the festering war between the two countries. The attacks have been well-documented, especially since some Iranian troops have been treated in European hospitals.

"Iraq was the first nation in history to use nerve agent in war," Mr. Feith said.

He said the Iraqis have been producing mustard gas and the nerve agent Tabun, and can deliver chemical munitions through bombs, mortars and artillery shells. Another source familiar with the matter said the Tabun produced by the Iraqis is "not as toxic as ours" but is nevertheless extraordinarily lethal.

Mr. Feith said that because the Iraqis "seem to be reasonably well satisfied with the military results of their use," the temptation is stronger for other Third World nations to resort to such weapons.

"It wasn't as if they used it and it didn't work," he said. "That might have discouraged other countries."

He said the Iranians are "definitely interested in acquiring a production capability and may have already begun."

Although the extent, if any, of Iranian production capability is not clear, Mr. Feith said the Iranians have "some capability from collecting unexploded Iraqi munitions."

Another Pentagon expert on the subject said in an interview that a chemical warfare cannister is "basically a container for liquids."

"You couldn't shoot the thing again," he said. "But you could drain it and put it into another container."

He said chemical artillery rounds basically are like conventional shells, except that the round must be designed so as to burst the casing and disperse the gas.

"There are unique things about handling chemicals, but the transaction is not all that difficult," he said. "White phosphorous, for example, has to be sealed tight because it reacts to air. If you can do that, you can put a chemical in the same round."

However, another expert in the field discounted the Iranian ability to mount a battlefield capability from Iraqi misfires. He said the likelihood of fatal accidents was high in any attempt at such makeshift production.

Staff writer Bill Kritzberg contributed to this article.